



OPINION

Crossing Guards Keep Kids Safe

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At busy intersections around Seattle every day, young school children are put in harm's way just getting to school. A 50-year-old city program employing adult crossing guards, uniformed and trained by the Seattle Police Department, is targeted for elimination by Mayor Greg Nickels and police Chief Gil Kerlikowske.

In this hard economic time of budget deficits, the mayor has focused the crossing guard debate on the dollars it costs in proposing to phase out the program.

I believe we should take this opportunity to rework the program to provide comprehensive solutions that put safety first for children near schools.

The issue is as simple as this: Children who are 5, 6 or 7 years old should not be left alone to determine if an unlighted, and sometimes unmarked, intersection is safe to cross. Children that young who are standing in the rain, or are late to class, can make rash decisions that could severely injure, or even end, their lives. And that says nothing about the decisions made by drivers traveling in the rain or late for work.

There simply is no substitute for a trained and experienced adult supervisor in those situations -- not flashing lights, not painted stripes in the road.

To craft a solution, we must first find a home for this program. It's clear that the Police Department has higher priorities than employing crossing guards. Still, the department can continue to be a partner in school safety efforts through the training of crossing guards and enforcement of traffic laws in school zones.

A better home for the crossing guard program may be the Seattle Department of Transportation, where other pedestrian issues are handled. SDOT easily can identify the troublesome school-zone intersections, and use the crossing guards as one tool -- along with street signage, traffic lights and pedestrian improvements -- to enhance overall safety near schools.

Next we need to commit to supporting this program long-term. The City Council must be willing to say children's safety is a high priority and dedicate general funds to this safety effort. The transportation department is well versed in securing grants for pedestrian improvements and can pursue every avenue to bring outside funds to this program. And Seattle Public Schools and school support groups such as the PTSA must step up to the plate and offer volunteer assistance to make these resources go further. With help, a single crossing guard at a school can deploy volunteer parents to cover all intersections surrounding that school -- a true community partnership.

Finally, a reassessment of the program can identify improvements that might increase safety and reduce costs. For instance, SDOT can identify and rank school intersections by risk level. At the most dangerous intersections, teams of two crossing guards linked by walkie-talkies could ensure safe passage for kids while single guards with volunteers might be deployed at the less risky intersections. Such a site ranking can be used to decide the locations of other pedestrian improvements, such as flashing lights or mid-street floppy signs. Crossing guards themselves can become research aides by advising engineers which improvements work best in school zones, for kids and drivers.

Crossing guards play a vital role in children's lives. Aside from promoting traffic safety, they discourage risky behavior and report suspicious people lurking near schools. Crossing guards are parental figures whom children can ask for help if they are lost or missed their bus. They are a part of the school experience, and provide a valuable education outside the classroom. School crossing guards are not just a budget item to be cut, but are there for children's safety and our city's civility.